

INDUSTRY WATCH

Clean cut cigarettes: fictitious launch foreshadows actual tobacco industry strategy

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Tobacco Control 2006;15:341–342. doi: 10.1136/tc.2005.013714

A fictitious cigarette brand, “launched” at the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health, appears to have been adopted by Philip Morris

Selling tobacco products with implied health claims has great potential to undermine tobacco prevention and cessation.^{1,2} To understand how such marketing might occur in an even less permissive marketing environment, an advertising agency was commissioned to develop a strategy to undermine tobacco regulation. A fictitious new cigarette brand, Clean Cut, was “launched” at the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health, in Chicago in 2000, as part of the Nicotine Plenary session. Since 2000 the Clean Cut script appears to have been adopted by Philip Morris with its test marketing of Marlboro UltraSmoothTM and by other tobacco products.

THE CLEAN CUT FORMULA

To simulate the product launch an actor playing the Clean Cut CEO explained how the brand could become a global blockbuster, keeping smokers smoking, bringing new smokers in, and inviting former smokers back with its allure and illusions of health. He showed how Clean Cut would address health concerns with changes espoused by the health community such as lower nitrosamines and reduced second hand smoke. He explained that this would make for great communications opportunities by the media, which loves science and health-related stories about big products. The fact that some health experts might decry the product while admitting potential benefits over traditional cigarettes would make them look foolish and the company look responsible. The controversy-hungry media would portray the company as doing its best to serve its customers while the health community appear more interested in damning the industry than in helping smokers.

MARLBORO ULTRASMOOTHTM FOLLOWS THE CLEAN CUT SCRIPT

In January 2005, Philip Morris announced the February launch of Marlboro UltraSmoothTM in the United States. Major news media touted potential health benefits of its “new carbon filter” that “lets the flavor through for a filtered smooth taste”.⁴ Philip Morris claimed the high ground by noting that more science was needed to justify claims.^{3,4} Public health experts reacted with some confusion, either “blessing” the product with faint damnations, calling it

premature to conclude that it would reduce disease, or conceding, with some qualifications, that Marlboro UltraSmoothTM almost certainly reduced exposure to at least some dangerous toxins. A few months later the *New York Times* explored the presumed potential of another new cigarette, FactTM, marketed by Filligent, which uses a proprietary filter that it claims “prevents them [a variety of chemicals in the smoke] from reaching the smoker”.⁵

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

Philip Morris and Filligent appeared to use a similar strategy to manipulate the media: (1) announce a new cigarette with potential to reduce toxins; (2) emphasise the science; (3) appear cautious about making actual claims until more research is done; (4) encourage the press to explore the issues with health experts. The tobacco control community needs to develop more effective communications to reach policy-makers, the media, and the public, to prepare for the “Clean Cuts” yet to come. It will be vital to learn from the “light cigarette” history and to stay abreast of evolving marketing strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLOSURES

The Clean Cut simulated product launch, Jordan, McGrath, Case and Taylor, Communications and Arnold Communications for development and launch of Clean Cut, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health for support of the launch, GlaxoSmithKline Consumer HealthCare for support of the product simulation and preparation of this manuscript, Pinney Associates for additional support of the development of the session and preparation of this manuscript. The efforts of JE Henningfield were also supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Innovators Awards Program at Johns Hopkins Medical School. JG Gitchell, JE Henningfield and JM Pinney provide consulting support to GlaxoSmithKline on tobacco control and treatment development and have a financial interest in a potential smoking cessation product. KE Kemper is employed by GlaxoSmithKline Consumer HealthCare that develops and markets smoking cessation products.

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Competing interests: none declared

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Received 28 July 2005
Accepted 25 April 2006

A video of the Nicotine Plenary Session with the Clean Cut launch and marketing imagery can be viewed at the *Tobacco Control* website (www.tobaccocontrol.com) and The Innovators Awards Program at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine (www.InnovatorsAwards.org).

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The Lighter Side



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